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Unrest Stirring South of the Border

Not in many years have relations between the United States and Mexico been as cool as they are today. Ironically, this estrangement comes at a time when economic and cultural ties are closer than ever.

A fundamental trouble seems to be that U.S. and Mexican leaders simply don't understand each other. No more startling proof of this could be imagined than the private conversation Mexican President Miguel de la Madrid had with two top aides late last year.

They weren't discussing U.S.-Mexican relations directly. The subject was the approaching Mexican midterm elections (held yesterday) in which the opposition National Action Party—or PAN—was expected to win two or three of seven governorships in northern Mexico. The president and his aides were discussing steps that could be taken to steal the election for their Institutional Revolutionary Party—or PRI—which has had a virtual monopoly on political power for more than 50 years.

But the Mexican leaders were worried about the violence that was sure to erupt if PAN's candidates were cheated out of victory. In the old days, before PAN emerged as a viable opposition party, the PRI would have had nothing to worry about. But disturbances have broken out in recent years when vote fraud had been too obvious.

According to a top-secret U.S. intelligence report on de la Madrid's strategy meeting, one of the two cabinet ministers made an astonishing suggestion: Perhaps the restive northern states

would secede from Mexico and join the United States. Far from being pooh-poohed, this scenario was seconded by de la Madrid, who said the United States would acquiesce in the annexation of the Mexican states.

This bit of high-level conversation may strike Americans as being divorced from reality, but that's beside the point. What matters is that, almost a century and a half after the U.S. war with Mexico and the annexation of Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, responsible Mexican leaders are still paranoid about the possibility of a Yankee conquest. Gen. Black Jack Pershing's punitive expedition 400 miles into Mexico in 1916 may be ancient history to us, but it seems like yesterday to Mexicans.

But if the Mexicans are still nursing psychic wounds over long-ago grievances, there's a certain convenient amnesia on this side of the Rio Grande. In fact, one of the big difficulties in U.S.-Mexican relations (and in U.S.-Nicaraguan relations, for that matter) is the insensitivity of American officials to our Latin neighbors' fear of Yankee aggression.

The State Department, at least, has long been aware of both the difficulties between the United States and Mexico and the importance of trying to erase them. "There [are] forces so powerful that the combined efforts of leaders here and in Mexico can only influence them at the margin," a secret department report states. "The problems of illegal immigrants, narcotics and social inequality are forces of this magnitude. These problems will be important to us: Mexican and American societies are becoming interwoven to the point of symbiosis."